Against the Grain

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Library-Vendor Relations

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Issues in Library-Vendor Relations

edited by ***Corrie Marsh*** (George Washington University)
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Issues: Is access more important than ownership?? Do we need acquisitions librarians??

We are indeed living in very interesting times! We have recently received very mixed messages about the future of acquisitions work. The interesting news is that libraries are beginning to spend large amounts of their budgets on access to information services in recognition of the fact that we cannot continue to purchase collections. Leasing and licensing arrangements are playing an increasing role in the business of acquisitions. Yet, there is a conflicting message out there — major research libraries are continuing to dissolve acquisitions departments and distribute the traditional business functions of service contract negotiations into collection managers' responsibilities, while lessening the overall status of acquisitions within the library.

Acquisitions librarians had better wake up and re-examine where their libraries might be heading — possibly without them. It is now vital that we consider new knowledge and philosophies that will broaden, rather than reduce, the role acquisitions can perform within the organization.

An expanded model was recently presented by Irene B. Hoadley's and John Corbin's "Up the Beanstalk: An Evolutionary Organizational Structure for Libraries" (*American Libraries*, July/August 1990). Hoadley and Corbin base their model on the assumption " that access will equal acquisitions" and that "the emphasis moves to fulfilling the needs of users rather than simply building larger collections." Their acquisitions model combines buying, borrowing, and leasing of collections. This presents a broader, interactive role for acquisitions managers to expand their abilities at service contract negotiations. Ironically, at the same time this article appeared, another major research library dissolved its acquisitions department.

What are the necessary traits that acquisitions librarians need to reconsider? For one, they must become more sensitive to user needs and services. For another, they must develop keen skills at handling licensing agreements and contracting services. Acquisitions managers need to be involved in all levels of library operational planning; we can no longer simply concentrate on technical processing.

It is no wonder that vendors and publishers are confused about who to contact and to whom to propose business arrangements within libraries. We are obviously not sure ourselves and the clear lines of responsibility have not yet sorted themselves out.

It's going to be very interesting to see where things go throughout the 1990's... Send your comments to Corrie Marsh or Barry Fast or to your editor. We're waiting!!

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Issue: Reflections on Firm Order Bidding: A Response

In the last issue of *ATG* Christian Boissonnas reported on Cornell's recent firm order bidding project. He describes the RFP process and the criteria he used to select two vendors. He also described a weighted performance analysis system which he will utilize to evaluate these two vendors in the future. This report was very interesting, and it should be considered as a valid method of vendor selection. Christian has added some useful information to this issue.

In the section of his article called "Afterthoughts", he engages in some speculation that, in our opinion, is worth examining further. He reflects on his selection of two "relatively unknown vendors" who offered the lowest cost plus bid, and proposes some reasons why these smallish library suppliers were the winners. Among his speculations" the winners do not advertise or attend ALA, they do not sell ancillary products like notification forms, and they operate in low cost, non-metropolitan areas. Christian was soliciting an "as cheap as possible" book supply service with "no support services." He assumes that the losers, the nine vendors who bid higher than the two winners, were unable to offer a competitive bid because "Providing libraries with as much [services] as possible is so deeply ingrained in their philosophies and business plans..." that it was impossible for them to offer a low bid. It remains to be seen if the two vendors can provide the service that Cornell requires at the cost plus price they promise.

Small local vendors can probably operate cheaper than large international library suppliers (more on this later). We have always believed that universities, especially rural universities, have an implicit mission to support and enhance the local cultural scene, and this certainly includes local booksellers. By doing some buying from local booksellers, the university helps provide a richer cultural environment for everyone in the surrounding communities, and, on a national scale, helps promote diversity and competition in the book industry.

But large international library suppliers also deserve support from universities, and for the same reasons described above. There is, if you will, a global community in which we all live. It is composed of rich nations and poor nations, and, most recently, a whole new community of nations emerging from tyranny. In the richer countries, like our own, the library community is demanding a whole array of services from vendors, ranging from simple firm order fulfillment (it's not so simple), through complex approval plans, electronic communications, technical services support, standing order services, and other kinds of collection management co-operation. Library suppliers are recognized by librarians as their ally in holding down personnel, computer, and other operating costs. Library suppliers are required to be high tech companies by the market, not because they want to find new ways to spend money. Without approval plans, standing orders and other services, libraries could not operate. Their material funds would be gobbled up by personnel and other costs which vendors now bear, albeit much more efficiently because they are spread over the whole market.

In the poorer nations of the world, book and journal funds ar scarce. When they are available, it is the larger international library suppliers who take the risk of supplying materials to these countries. It is a real risk: payments are slow, shipments are lost and damaged, and sometimes a revolution or other catastrophe prevents the vendor ever getting paid. Only the largest, most financially secure companies can take these risks. But they are risks that must be taken if these poorer nations can educate their people and develop self sustaining economies. The newly democratic countries of Eastern Europe need a virtual rebuilding of library collections. Only the larger library suppliers can provide the services these countries need to build collections effectively and efficiently.

We are not, emphatically, suggesting that American libraries do business with larger library suppliers out of a sense of altruistic social zeal. We are stating that larger library suppliers are neither inherently inefficient nor are they wasting resources on advertising and notifications slips. They offer a wide array of high tech services because libraries need them and demand them. These services cost something, and that cost is built into every price negotiation with every library. Whether that negotiation takes place in a bid format, or takes place over time as the result of a healthy competitive industry, libraries end up paying the price for services that are available but may not be useful to them individually. Those services are useful to enough libraries, however,, for vendors to find it worthwhile to develop them. To imply that their cost is wasteful ignores the important role these services play in more efficient library operations and better collection management.